

The Non-Resemblance of *Juche* and *Kokutai*: Conceptual Dissimilarity in Particular Characteristics

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Abstract: This paper questions the claim that the *Juche* ideology of North Korea resembles the *Kokutai* ideology of fascist-era Japan. Descriptively comparing a delimited sample of late North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's writings on *Juche* from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s against the Imperial Japanese doctrinal text *Basic Principles of the National Polity* (*Kokutai no hongi*, 1937), the paper observes that *Juche* and *Kokutai*, while sharing some superficial general features, are fundamentally antithetical in their particular characteristics. *Juche* is a defensive anthropocentric materialism, and *Kokutai* is an aggressive supernatural idealism.

Keywords: *anthropocentrism, Imperial Japan, North Korea, social-political philosophy, state ideology, supernaturalism, text studies, totalitarianism*

1. Introduction

A notion is in circulation among non-philosophers that the *Juche* ideology of North Korea “resonates” with the *Kokutai* ideology of fascist-era Japan. This idea was proposed by historian Bruce Cumings in 1982–1983 (289) and reintroduced in 1993 (223) and 1997 (181, 402–404). Since then, the *Kokutai-Juche* association has appeared in the writings of several scholars, such as Charles K. Armstrong (2009: 43), Selig S. Harrison (2002: 24), Jacques E. C. Hymans (2008: 265), Gavan McCormack (2004: 75–76), Michael E. Robinson (2007: 161), Sonia Ryang (1999: 111n5), C. Kenneth Quinones (2009: 18), and C. Kenneth Quinones & Joseph Tragert (2003: 158). Notably, Harrison (24) says *Kokutai* bears a “striking

resemblance” to *Juche*. The problem is that the claim of resonance/resemblance between the two ideologies is definitionally, descriptively, and factually incorrect.

To resonate means to “meet with agreement,” and to resemble means to be similar, to be “of the same kind in appearance, character, or quantity, without being identical” (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 2001). If an ideology may be likened to an organism, it can be said that the claim of resonance/resemblance between *Kokutai* and *Juche* is analogous to stating that a platypus and a salamander are similar. Indeed, the two are animals; they are of a horizontal posture; they have four legs and a tail; and they can swim. Yet on the level of comparative biology, platypuses and salamanders are genetically, physiologically, and morphologically dissimilar. They are separate species: mammal and amphibian.

Kokutai and *Juche* must be approached as one would two organisms, but on the level of comparative ideology. The conceptual dissimilarity of the two ideologies is seen in a sample of official doctrinal texts: *Basic Principles of the National Polity* (*Kokutai no hongi*, 1937) and late North Korean leader Kim Jong Il’s “On Some Questions in Understanding the *Juche* Philosophy” (1974), “On the *Juche* Idea” (1982), “The *Juche* Philosophy Is an Original Revolutionary Philosophy” (1996), and “On Preserving the *Juche* Character and National Character of the Revolution and Construction” (1997).¹ Descriptive comparison of the content in these texts disconfirms the *Kokutai-Juche* association.

2. *Kokutai* Ideology

Kokutai is basically a form of spiritual mysticism and monistic idealism. It is a supernatural, super-rational, and totalitarian political doctrine that regards *mind and matter* as one, *life and death* as one, *humanity and nature* as one, and *individual and state* as one (Yoshida, et al., 1949: 80, 81, 96, 145, 147, 158). Central to the doctrine are the concepts of the Way, the Will, the spirit, and the gods. *Kokutai* places a premium on tradition, and its sovereign, the Emperor (*tennō*,

heavenly ruler), a god incarnate presiding over a god-handed “great family nation,” willfully transmits the eternal spirit and principles of the gods (59, 83, 89–90). The heavenly ruler holds “supreme power,” and all laws, regulations, and statues originate in his virtue (150, 165).

Hostile to “all revolutionary ideas,” *Kokutai* regards anarchism, Communism, and socialism as “paradoxical and extreme conceptions” based on Western individualism (Yoshida, et al., 1949: 53, 54, 150). Communism and socialism are rejected for their “class individualism,” with Communism specifically for the “erroneous idea” of economic determinism and class war (181, 182). *Kokutai* does not see democracy and liberalism as extreme, but as conducive to egoism and individualism, which are unacceptable (181). Less critical of Fascism and Nazism, *Kokutai* appraises them as an uprising against “traditional individualism,” but also as forms of bourgeois individualist nationalism and racial consciousness (54, 182).

While *Kokutai* distinguishes itself from the Western movements of Fascism and Nazism, the doctrine is ultranationalist and racialist and places “sacred” Japan at the center, the national entity being “unparalleled in the world” (Yoshida, et al., 1949: 80, 82). Consequently, the ideology presents the Japanese Empire as having a “grave cosmopolitan mission” to enrich and preserve the peace in Asia and among all humankind (55, 171). A policy of imperialist war is thus pursued with the aim of “great harmony” (95). Consistent with its ultranationalism, *Kokutai* prides itself in importing, adapting, and assimilating foreign culture (American, Chinese, European, Korean, Indian) and sublimating it as Japanese culture (51, 54, 75, 134, 142–3, 146, 148, 175, 177, 183).

Economically, *Kokutai* espouses a form of corporatist (organic nationalist) state-directed capitalism adverse to “Western [free] market economy,” that being seen as too individualistic and focused on “unwholesome self-interest” (Yoshida, et al., 1949: 132). The imperial national economy is a “great enterprise” in which each person is assigned/allotted duties in “commercial and industrial activities,” the

public interests (of the heavenly ruler) coming before the private interests (of the individual) in order to enhance “Imperial prestige,” “national power,” and “national wealth” (167, 169, 170). Here, the Way of harmony is “forgetting oneself,” accepting class society, and exalting one’s allotted duty (96, 97, 158).

Indeed, self-effacement, self-sacrifice, and service to the state are crucial in *Kokutai*, for “an individual is an existence *belonging* to a State” (Yoshida, et al., 1949: 81; emphasis added). Accordingly, the doctrine celebrates “dying to one’s ego,” “dying to self,” and “leaving self behind to unite with the public” to “become one with the State” (81, 132, 141). People must live not for the “small self,” but for the “great, true self” (134). After all, the state does not exist for individual protection and welfare, but individuals for the state and the prosperity of the divine Imperial Throne (86, 143, 180). This is the Way of unity with sovereign and subjects, whose relationship is that of a father and his loyal children (81, 132). Self-less loyalty obtains life (82).

3. *Juche* Ideology

According to Kim Jong Il ([1996]: 9), *Juche* (literally, subject) is the “political philosophy” and “absolute truth” of the Workers’ Party of Korea, a “weapon of struggle” that guides the “popular masses” in the Korean revolution. Identifying itself as a non-Marxist, state-socialist doctrine, *Juche* makes “man” the fundamental question of philosophy, establishing as axiomatic the principle that “man is the master of everything and decides everything,” everything being nature and society (Kim [1974]; see David-West, 2009).² “Man,” in *Juche*, is a social being (political animal) whose “essential features” are independence (social desire to master life), creativity (capacity to act purposively), and consciousness (ability to understand) (Kim, [1974]).

While *Juche* is anthropocentric, it is also materialistic, regarding “man” as a “material being” and product of biological and social evolution: “Man” lives in a

material world that “moves, changes and develops in accordance with its own laws, *not by any supernatural force*” (Kim, [1974]; emphasis added). *Juche* takes Marxist-Leninist (i.e., Stalinist) dialectical materialism as its premise, accepting the existence of an objective material world and rejecting idealistic/mysterious and metaphysical/immutable conceptions (Kim, [1996]: 2, 3). General laws of nature act on social phenomena; however, in *Juche*, social movement has its own laws, as the “volitional action” and “driving force” of the masses cause social movement (Kim, [1996]: 4; cf. Stalin, [1938]).

Distinguishing between an “exploitative society” and one based on the independent popular masses, *Juche* holds that this national social group of working people (not only the working class) is “in no way separate from the country and nation” and that they “live and shape their destiny *with* a nation-state as a unit” (Kim, [1996]: 9; Kim, [1997a]; emphasis added). Moreover, all who “share the *blood and soul* of the Korean nation,” regardless of class, strata, social system, or country of residence must aim for the “development of the country and prosperity of the nation” (Kim, [1997a]; emphasis added). While this is not an explicitly self-effacing corporatism, the existence of the individual depends on the survival of the nation and vice versa.

Approving of the fusion of Communism and nationalism, *Juche* sees North Korea as a state-socialist system without class antagonisms, where the whole society is a “socio-political organism,” an “integrated whole” of the “great leader” (*suryōng*, chieftain), the party, and the loyal masses to whom the leader is a caring “great national father”; the people are “Kim Il Sung’s nation” (*Kim Il-sōng minjok*, literally, Kim Il Sung ethnic-race) (Kim, [1997a]; Kim, [1997b]).³ Striving to preserve national independence and national character against “imperialism and dominationism,” *Juche* state-socialism rejects “Western-style” capitalist state management and social organization, the “Western-style ‘free world’” that subjugates and assimilates nations, and globalization and internationalization,

which bring in American, Japanese, and Western fashions (Kim, [1997a]).

Understanding economic independence as the basis of national sovereignty, which is central to the Korean revolution, *Juche* state-socialism mobilizes internal labor, resources, finances, and technology; undertakes multifarious, integral, and comprehensive development of the national economy to produce industrial goods and agricultural products; gives preference to heavy machine-building industry as the backbone of the economy; and engages in international economic and technical cooperation (foreign trade) (Kim, [1982]). The system is conducted in a “planned manner” and combines political and moral incentives with material incentives. This is coupled with a defensive foreign policy (Ibid.).⁴

4. Antithetical Particular Characteristics

Kokutai and *Juche* thus described as found in major doctrinal texts, it is apparent that the claims of their resonance and resemblance are erroneous. The Japanese fascist-era and North Korean ideological doctrines exhibit clear and significant conceptual disparities in their particular characteristics that make the association of the ideologies in academic writing self-invalidating. Of *Kokutai*, Japanese studies political historian Rikki Kersten (2010: 531) says the core notions of the doctrine are “[1] the divine origins of the imperial family; [2] the essential racial and spiritual homogeneity of the Japanese; [3] the notion of the emperor as the father of the nation; and [4] a continuous (‘unbroken’) line of emperors from ancient times.”

Among the four core ideas of *Kokutai*, only the second and the third can claim superficial similarity, as general features, with *Juche*. But it is the first idea and the fourth idea that are really more important and have no equivalent relation in the official state ideology of North Korea. Whether as general features or particular characteristics, supernatural divine origin and ancient imperial lineage are conceptually *antithetical* in the North Korean case (Fig. 1). Considering the

perspective of *Juche*, it would regard *Kokutai* as totally mystical and reactionary, as imperialist and dominationist, and as a doctrine of colonial slavery. *Kokutai* had, indeed, been used to justify Imperial Japanese colonization of Korea (1910–1945).⁵

<i>Kokutai</i> Ideology	<i>Juche</i> Ideology
Way	Objective reality
Spirit	Matter
Gods	Human beings
Will	Volitional action
Emperor	Great leader
Imperial Throne	Workers' Party of Korea
Self-less subjects	Popular masses
Empire	Republic
Imperial state-capitalism	National state-socialism
Cosmopolitan mission	Korean revolution
Aggression	Defense

Fig. 1. Antithetical particular characteristics of *Kokutai* and *Juche*.

On the other side, *Kokutai* would perceive *Juche* as an adoption of extreme “Occidental socialism” and “abstract totalitarianism,” as a form of revolutionary class individualism that pits individual against individual and class against class, which “foments many problems and disturbances in national and social life” (Yoshida, et al., 1949: 180, 182, 183). Moreover, *Kokutai* would see *Juche* anthropocentrism and *Juche* state-socialist economy as not conforming to the Way, but “based on ideas conceived in the individual’s mind” (133, 170, 180). The North Korean ideology would be a Western corruption: a disharmonious, dualistic, godless, individualistic, and subjective ideology that denies the divine cosmopolitan mission of Imperial Japan.

The precedent of *Juche* in colonial-era anti-Japanism is discussed by political scientist Han S. Park (2002; see Suh, 2013). *Juche* proper, however, was a product of the North Korean 1950s and 1960s, a reaction to Soviet “de-Stalinization” (1953–1956, 1961–1964) and the Sino-Soviet split (1961–1963) (see Kang, 2001; Kim, 1964; Szalontai, 2005). Dae-Sook Suh (1988: 305), also a political scientist, says *Juche* is firmly rooted in the North Korean experience: “It is basically a North Korean effort to be self-reliant—a reaction to their past political subjugation, economic dependence, and need for military assistance from the Soviet Union and China.” Suh (1988: 309, 313) adds, “The bitter experience of the Korean people, their resilience, and their self-respect are responsible for the *chuch’e* idea,” which is a “xenophobic nationalism.”

Despite the antithetical particular characteristics of *Kokutai* and *Juche*, one may be tempted to underline their generic Confucianism, for example, the leader as a father and the people as loyal/filial children. But that is a superficial observation. Confucian ethical-moral philosophy and its reinterpretation in Neo-Confucianism have broad historical and cultural influence in East Asia. More crucially, Japanese *Kokutai* combines imperialist nationalism, radical Shintō ultranationalism, and Bushidō, while North Korean *Juche* combines anti-colonial nationalism, Stalinist Marxism-Leninism, and Shirhak Neo-Confucianism (see David-West, 2011; Skya, 2009). Philosophically and politically, *Kokutai* is an aggressive supernatural idealism, whereas *Juche* is a defensive anthropocentric materialism.

5. Conclusion

The North Korean *Juche* ideology is neither resonant nor resemblant with the *Kokutai* ideology of fascist-era Japan. When historian Bruce Cumings proposed the association in the early 1980s and repeated it in the early and late 1990s, that was a *hypothesis*.⁶ Yet what should have been the starting point for further comparative ideological investigation was taken as an article of faith for three decades. North

Korean studies, as a social-scientific academic discipline, cannot operate on faith, on absolute belief and trust in authority. Faith as such is a principle of religion and serves its special purpose there. What is needed is confirmation of propositions and hypotheses through systematic empirical and logical verification.

Scrutiny of the conceptual substance of *Kokutai* and *Juche* in *Basic Principles of the National Polity* and Kim Jong Il's writings reveals that the two national ideologies are discrepant, bearing only superficial similarities. As seen in the opening analogy of the platypus and the salamander, *general features* cannot be substituted for *particular characteristics*. Cumings correctly identified a set of general features in *Kokutai* and *Juche*: corporatism, familism, national solipsism, and shared Chinese etymology in *tai* and *che* (basis, body, essence). Where he and other scholars who followed him erred was to categorically presume this a descriptive and logical proof of resonance and resemblance.

This short paper has attempted to show through a delimited, descriptive comparison the non-resemblance of *Juche* and *Kokutai* according to official North Korean and Japanese doctrinal sources. More research in comparative ideology, however, is needed to further substantiate and confirm the thesis of non-resemblance. Here, one must employ frameworks and methods of analysis *in addition* to those of economics, history, and political science, which dominate North Korean studies.⁷ The antithetical particular characteristics of *Juche* and *Kokutai* require in-depth investigation in the theoretical and applied philosophical sciences. The author suspects the philosophical evidence will be supporting.

Notes

1. Cumings (1982–1983; 1993; 1997) does not cite these official policy texts of *Kokutai* and *Juche*. On the Japanese side are references to sectarian Nichiren Buddhist preacher/ultranationalist Tanaka Chigaku's *What Is Nippon Kokutai?* (1935) and to intellectual historian/political scientist Maruyama Masao's *Thought*

and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics (1969). On the North Korean side are references to Korean Central News Agency articles, *Workers' Daily* (*Rodong shinmun*) articles, and Kim Jong Il's "Abuses of Socialism Are Intolerable" (1993).

2. Conceptually contrary to the *Juche* axiom "man is the master of everything and decides everything," *Kokutai* maintains, "When people determinedly count themselves as masters and assert their egos, there is nothing but contradictions and the setting of one against the other; and harmony is not begotten," and the same goes for "subjugation of nature by man" (Yoshida, et al., 1949: 93, 96).

3. One should note that North Korea deleted "Communism," but retained "socialism," in the military-first (*sōngun*) constitution adopted on April 9, 2009.

4. Bureaucratic central planning is no longer typical of the North Korean economic system as a whole, a result of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, Soviet Union, and COMECON in 1989 to 1991; the great famine of 1996 to 1999; and the official sanction of private markets with the economic reform measures of 2002. See Choi (2007), David-West (2013), Kim (2006), Kim (2008), and Lim (2009a; 2009b).

5. Clark (2000: 56), says, "In the 1930s, Koreans, like all Japanese subjects, were trained to think of themselves as part of the Japanese 'body' or *kokutai*. They were literally taught to think of themselves as the body's hands and feet, unable to exist apart from the body and only having a purpose as part of the body."

6. Cumings' hypothesis is problematized by an implicit admission that he does not understand *Kokutai* and *Juche*: "One can read book after book and not fathom the core meaning of this set of [*Kokutai*] dicta," and "'The Idea,' *chuch'e*, seems at first glance to be readily understandable. [...] On closer inspection, however, the term's meaning is less accessible" (1982–1983: 282, 289; 1993: 203, 223; 1997: 403).

7. Although he is not a North Korean studies specialist, the late James B. Palais (1995: 412) illustrates a historical approach that distinguishes *Kokutai* and *Juche*:

Kim Il-sung's ideology of *juche* (*chuch'e* 主體) in no way resembles the Japanese claim for the uniqueness of the Japanese Emperor or the Japanese

kokutai 国体 [the Chinese characters used in 1937 are 國體—AD] (national essence) because it [*Juche*] means self-reliance and independence in contrast to the legacy of Korean dependency on Chinese culture and the tributary system of the past.

Moreover, *Juche* is part of “a strong movement to remove the stigma of colonial Japanese historiography and claim a place for Korean pride” (Ibid.). These observations come after discussion on the “main goal of the historical discourse in the two Koreas,” since the U.S.-Soviet liberation of Korea from Imperial Japan in 1945, to “expunge the blot of inferiority” and “rescue Korea from subjugation, degradation, and mediocrity” (410). Palais makes no reference to Cumings (1982–1983; 1993).

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